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ABSTRACT

Presently, the most frequent point of contact between the United States and many Caribbean island states is the immigrant population. Incentives for immigration are provided by a tradition of colonialism, economies dependent upon agriculture, and problems resulting from rapidly increasing populations. The continuing influx of Caribbeans to the United States is providing a concomitant inflow of students into American schools. Since little is known by the general American public about the Caribbean as a whole and about the historical, social, and cultural background of the Caribbean peoples, it is imperative that the American educational community be oriented to Caribbean students who carry their own needs and values into the educational setting. This paper attempts to address these considerations by examining background issues of Caribbean conditions and by using this examination to explain certain cultural nuances. Suggestions are offered to those responsible for educating Caribbean students. (Author/MK)

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TEACHING AND LEARNING WITH CARIBBEAN STUDENTS

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TEACHING AND LEARNING WITH CARIBBEAN STUDENTS

ABSTRACT

The United States' involvement in the Caribbean has been largely guided by military, political, and economic self-interest, rather than a congruent, consistent policy of assistance and long-range regional planning for development. Today, its biggest point of contact with the Caribbean universe is the immigrant.

Many Caribbean island states provide the incentive for immigration. Their small size, historical tradition of colonialism and dependence on agricultural production for subsistence and international trade, as well as other complex problems, subject most of them to post-colonial dependence on world powers.

With one the world's highest birth rates and a declining death rate, the Caribbean region is expected to double its population by the end of the century. Pressures of an expanding, increasingly urban population have brought about rising unemployment, food and fuel shortages, and changing social and political ideologies to the independent nations and territories in the region. As a consequence, more than three million people from the island nations have migrated to the United States within the last quarter century.

More recently, rapid changes in ideological, economic, and political circumstances within and without the region have acted as a catalyst to increased influxes of immigrants to the United States. This continuing influx of Caribbean migrants is providing a concomitant inflow of students into American schools.

Since relatively little in known by the general American public about the Caribbean as a whole, and still less about the historical, social, and cultural nuances of the peoples, it is imperative that the American educational community, at least, be oriented to Caribbean students who, as they enter American educational settings, carry with them their own particular set of needs and values as they grapple with the problems of adjustment, teaching and learning.

This paper attempts to address some of these cogent considerations, by critically examining background issues of Caribbean conditions and, using this examination to explain certain cultural nuances, thus offers suggestions to those who assume the responsibility for meeting some educational needs.

Today, the Caribbean's biggest point of contact with the United States of America is the immigrant. Many of the island states provide the incentive for migration. Their small size, historical tradition of colonialism, dependence on agricultural production for sustenance and international trade, as well as varying social problems, seem to subject most of them to post-colonial dependence on world powers.

With one of the world's highest birth-rates and a declining death-rate, the Caribbean universe is expected to double its population by the end of the century.[1] Population pressure has caused rising unemployment, food and fuel shortages, and changing social and political ideologies within the islands and territories.

More than three million people have migrated to the United States in the last twenty-five years; and, this continuing influx of immigrants is providing a concomitant inflow of students into American schools. Numbers have increased recently.

Since relatively little is known by the general American public about the islands, beyond the beaches and emerald waters which lure winter-weary tourists, and still less, about the cultural background of the inhabitants,[2] there remains a very critical need for such information.

In particular, the American education community ought to be oriented to crucibles of the Caribbean since new immigrants are now entering American educational settings in ever-increasing numbers, and are taking with them their own particular values and needs, as they grapple with problems of adjustment, teaching, and learning. This paper will attempt to address these cogent considerations.

Past Issues

The current United States-Caribbean connection has its beginnings in some historical issues. For the most part, this relationship has been tied to military and economic interests.[3] Major events which occurred in the region before and after World War 11 attest to this fact. There were for example, the occupation of Cuba and Puerto Rico in 1898; the purchase of the Dutch West Indies in 1917; the occupation of Haiti between 1915-1933, the Dominican Republic between 1915-1924; the establishment of naval and airbases in British-ruled islands in 1940; and, the establishment of agri-business systems by multi-national companies and labor contracts.

The peculiar involvement between the United States and the Caribbean has been largely guided by military, political and economic self-interest on the part of the former. The impact has been so forceful to the degree that whereas the English, Spanish, French, and Dutch reigned, it has been the United States which ruled.

Present Dilemmas

Even with the coming into being of political maturity and independence among Caribbean island states in recent years, the thrust towards economic viability continues to be fraught with difficulty. This difficulty finds its underpinnings in the region's social history which is largely characterized by slavery, colonialism, and exploitation.[4]

The history of rampant colonialism, dependence on different metropoles, and the legacy of a rigid traditional plantation system established the balkanization of the region. This served to maintain closed populations, a fact which was already aggravated by the natural phenomena of distance and insularity. Thus, economically tied to metropolitan interests of the "mother" countries, the Caribbean remains today, an area of regional, ethnic, and economic fragmentation.

With functional relations substantially lacking among the various islands and ethnic groups, to date only marginal success has been achieved in the area of economic cooperation. The Caribbean Free Trade Association (CARIFTA) and the Caribbean Common Market (CARICOM) have emerged as indigenous attempts to meet certain economic needs of the area. Until now, participatory support has come primarily from the English-speaking islands, former British colonies of the region.

History therefore, is responsible for the internal fragmentation of the Caribbean. Such history has created a legacy of common problems: of persistent unemployment and under-employment; of crises, severe balance of payment difficulties; of insufficient industrial capacities, brain drain, and heavy dependence on a few basic staples, in what one Caribbean historian choses to call the "problematic Caribbean".[5]

The issue of internal fragmentation stands as a huge obstacle to larger regional and cooperative planning. Even though it is frequently said that the local economies follow a similar pattern, in fact, the cultures and social structures of the region vary considerably and, consequently, life styles and political behavior.[6]

Future Possibilities

Undaunted by the criticality of these extenuating circumstances, Caribbeans exube a vibrancy that kindles the spirit of hope. This spirit gives sustenance to visions and plans for the future. As if taking a cue from H.G. Wells' observation that, 'human history becomes more a race between education and catastrophe'[7] educational efforts in the Caribbean have improved considerably, especially since independence. Profound faith in the efficaciousnes of education in the resolution of socio-economic problems has generated much discourse and planning of educational delivery systems.

The developmental and transformational role of educational planning and delivery systems stems largely from the view that education can make a direct contribution to the economic development of a country, and should no longer be looked upon entirely as a social service. In essence, it is not totally an item of consumption; it has an important element of investment in it. The issue is largely a philosophical one. There are varying beliefs about the ways in which desirable development may come about. Some persons believe that economic efforts are the key; others see the promulgation of education as critical. Still others see the growing impact of communication through press radio, and television as a major factor in creating a sense of regional development.[8]

Although it has been admittedly difficult to show causal relationship between investment in education and rate of return, it has generally been accepted that an education program geared to social and economic needs of a country can help to increase the rate of economic growth. The various educational plans which are effectuated in island nations throughout the region constitute an endorsement of their viability.[9]

In all probability, the 1980s will witness individual island states assuming greater responsibility for education in the Caribbean. Commonwealth and inter-regional agencies may continue to be junior partners in cooperative educational efforts.

Thus, educational priorities for the eighties are likely to include attempts to bring together, the modalities into closer pragmatic alignment.

This reference to educational priorities is neither complete nor ordered. The suggestion is to subject these concerns to debate and thereby challenge us all to assume responsibility for the direction of education policy for the region, in the 1980s.[10]

The increase in regional literacy within recent years underscores the effects of education as a liberating force in the developing Caribbean where the desire for change has been seen as "striving to outflank and falsify limits ...."[11] But like other developing countries elsewhere, the Caribbean region has a need for capital goods, if the rate of development is to be improved. So while educational planning and delivery proceed, the island states continue to face capital shortage and labor surplus.

Therefore, a critical question for engagement is that of deciding what can be done in the interim, in terms of utilizing the factors of production in order to prime the pump for, and speed up economic growth. This is important, because while time awaits the unfolding of events, the migration process continues from the region whose complex and diverse character almost defies unity; whose people's sense of self is drawn from traditional exposure to intense suffer-ing and struggle for survival; but, in whom there is a strong and pervasive determination to succeed.

Required Factors of Understanding in American Educational Settings

To some degree, it is the immigrant who establishes the link between the two regions. The fostering of Caribbean and United States regional understanding and cooperation is an imperative which may be best accomplished through education. Once in the United States, this need becomes particularly critical for the immigrant who must enter local educational settings.

By the very nature of the diverse ethnic and cultural character of the Caribbean, students attending American educational settings will naturally constitute multi-cultural grouping . One may be inclined to reason that since studies of families in far away places have had their counterpart in the growing literature on the family among different ethnic, racial, and religious groups within American society,[12] then whatever factors of understanding education personnel have of students in general will suffice for Caribbean students. The peculiarities of Caribbean students demand their own set of considerations, indeed if the purpose of education is to be properly served.

American educators in planning for and interacting with, Caribbean students will require, among other support systems, a sense of Caribbean history, and a sensitivity towards the backgrounds of students; their values and culture patterns; their environment and the specific influences which impinge upon them. They will need to have an understanding of Caribbean students' penchant for education and their unsung determination to satisfy

personal and parental aspirations which emanate from a desire to both 'make it' and to please.

American educators will need to include into their repertoire of understandings, a sentivitiy towards non-American phenomena; that speech patterns may not necessarily be incorrect, but different; that British-oriented spelling and writing style, for example will in time, be gradually adapted to the American mode; that as American teachers have difficulty sometimes understanding Caribbean students, so too do such students have difficulty understanding American speech patterns. It is logical to suggest that it is not necessary to hasten the process of Americanization; this adds to the confusion already created by culture shock; nor, should teachers slip into the occasional tendency to stereotype and denigrate the students' historic and cultural backgrounds.

American educators need to understand the dynamics of culture shock as experienced by Caribbean students on arrival in unfamiliar educational settings; to be empathetic to those displays of well-known human reaction of bewilderment, dislocation, temporary withdrawal, or aggression which may accompany classroom behavior; and, to be able to treat these reactions in their proper context and meaning, not as permanent disturbance factors.

American educators should avoid pre-conceived notions about Caribbean students and their ability; they should not confuse learning styles with learning ability. Being different does not necessarily mean difficult or disadvantaged. Educators should be sensitive to the incidence of culture conflict which is experienced by students as they struggle to maintain the old while embracing a new culture. Moreover, students should be assisted in making the transition which for them, is often fraught with grave difficulties and numerous inconsistencies.

American educators can enhance their understanding of Caribbean students by getting to know their parents. They should strive to involve them in the endeavors of their chilren's educational settings by inviting them speakers, resource persons, or just simply helpers or supporters in the institution's educational operation, whatever form it takes. They should demonstrate positive attitudes towards, and maintain high expectations of, both parents and students.

Such gestures should serve to open up the channel for viable interaction, which will provide a framework for deriving knowledge in such vital areas as religious beliefs and practices, concerns about family life, structure and function; and, such relevant issues as important events and customs in their lives, food and clothing preferences, their socio-cultural, and economic circumstances.

American educators should guard against faulty generalizations that subscribe to the ascription of certain characteristics to all students of Caribbean background. They must be willing to deal realistically with students' cultural nuances, agreeing not to treat them as the butts of silly jest. They should develop intercultural sensitivity among educators through study of the differences among students from the region. Such differences should include learners' cognitive styles, language, values, and preferred means of communication and participation.

There should be an understanding of the peculiarities of basic communicative signals of the region; and these should be blended at all levels of communication, including the spoken word with whatever else is transmitted on the vocal wave length, with visual, language and imagery. Such knowledge should be incorporated into the process of acculturation which should be structured and gradual, not erratic and hastened, since such an approach can produce deleterious psychological effects. Above all, American educators should use the success of these efforts to facilitate content and process in the dynamics of teaching and learning within traditional American educational settings.

There must be a sense in which the student-teacher relationship must generate reciprocal sustenance. Becoming aware of self and others in terms of human variations, needs, abilities goals and apirations is of paramount importance for both

American educators and Caribbean students who, thrown together by dint of historical, economic, and educational circumstances must establish rational relationships of understanding as underpinnings to viable support systems that are facilitative of the the teaching-learning act in American educational settings.

To be fully functional, the model of understandings articulated in this paper, should become part of a teacher-education package, particularly for those educators who work in large urban areas of the United States where noticeable concentrations of Caribbean people settle and go to school. Incorporating these ideas into teacher-preparation curricula should help to alleviate some of the difficulties which Caribbean students encounter as they struggle to cope with the problems of adjustment, teaching and learning.

But more than this immediate need lies the possibility that American educators who more and more are encountering numerous students from the Caribbean, will learn from their preparation and exposure, strategies for improved service to their "new" clientelle. They will for example, learn that Caribbeans have both similar and dissimilar needs and values in much the same way as those groups which have traditionally made up the United States population; that they should utilize a sentivity of understanding which moves them from the level of simply tolerating differences to one of genuine understanding and support for unhampered educational growth among all students.

Footnotes

1
See Ford Foundation Letter, Volume 7, No. 6, December 1, 1976.

2
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For an exhaustive treatment of these issues read:
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See address from Professor R.N. Murry, Dean, University of the West Indies School of Education in Nicholson, R. M. ed. Report of the First Biennial Eastern Caribbean Conference on Teacher Education. Cave Hill, Barbados, U.W.I. School of Education, April 18-20, 1977.

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